
TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE....

A Column on Consumer Issues

by Attorney General Wayne Stenehjem's
Consumer Protection and Antitrust Division

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PHONY INTERNET BUSINESS GUIDE INVOICES

Unscrupulous promoters are soliciting advertising for "online business directories." Although these directories appear to be legitimate Yellow Pages publications, they are not distributed to the public, posted on the web, or promoted as promised. As a result, the bogus directories – if they exist at all – offer no benefits to businesses that pay to advertise in them.

The solicitation to buy ad space may look like an invoice and may even bear the "walking fingers" logo. The logo is not protected by federal copyright or trademark registration. That is how fraudulent promoters are able to lead businesses to believe they are affiliated with the local telephone directories.

The U.S. Postal Service requires solicitations that look like invoices, bills or account statements to carry the following notice: THIS IS NOT A BILL. THIS IS A SOLICITATION. YOU ARE UNDER NO OBLIGATION TO PAY THE AMOUNT STATED ABOVE UNLESS YOU ACCEPT THIS OFFER.

Be wary of any invoice that doesn't include the telephone number for the vendor. Fraudulent companies don't want people to call them with questions or complaints. Before you buy advertising space through a mail solicitation or pay an "invoice":

- ◆ Check out the company and its publication. Call your local Yellow Pages publisher to see if it is affiliated with the soliciting company.
- ◆ Ask for the online directory's web address and call advertisers in the directory to ask if their listing has been a good buy. If your business is listed in the Yellow Pages of a legitimate publisher, you likely will be listed in their online directory at no charge.
- ◆ Don't be pressured into paying for goods or services you never ordered. Fraudulent companies often use threats of collection or legal action to try to get payment for bogus invoices.
- ◆ Check with the Consumer Protection Division to determine if any complaints have been filed about the publisher.

If you think you have been scammed by a promoter pitching bogus Yellow Pages or business directories, contact your local Postmaster or Postal Inspector. Their numbers are available in the blue pages of your telephone directory, or you may write to: Chief

Postal Inspector, United States Postal Service, Washington, DC 20260-2100. You can also call the Mail Fraud Complaint Center at 1-800-372-8347.

The Attorney General's Consumer Protection Division investigates allegations of fraud in the marketplace. Investigators also mediate individual complaints against businesses. If you have a consumer problem or question, call the Consumer Protection Division at 328-3404, toll-free at 1-800-472-2600, or 1-800-366-6888 (w/TTY). This article and other consumer information is located on our website at www.ag.state.nd.us.

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